



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report for February 2011 – State of Market Towns

Background

The Commission for Rural Communities' *State of the countryside* update reports aim to provide a broad picture of social, economic and environmental conditions and change across rural England. The first report was published in 1999 and the previous in July 2010. The latest and final, *Market towns*, was published in February 2011.

Market towns form an important locus in many rural areas for housing and employment and a hub for rural economic and service activity and are therefore at the centre of the societal and demographic changes currently taking place in rural areas and in England as a whole. For rural areas this confirms the importance of towns in the fabric and health of rural life.

However, the current rural and urban definition, upon which most government spatial analysis is based, omits the separate consideration of small, medium and large sized towns. Smaller towns below 10,000 population are analysed as part of the broader 'rural' category, whilst other small, medium and larger towns above 10,000 population are incorporated into a broader 'urban' category. This has meant that statistics analysed on this basis have not tracked social and economic trends as they impact towns. Perhaps as a result, towns have been generally overlooked from both a research and policy perspective.

The most recent *State of the countryside* update seeks to address this gap by studying a range of topics covering broad themes of population, services, business health, employment and deprivation. The analysis on which the report is based comes from work undertaken by the Rural Evidence Research Centre (RERC) at Birkbeck College, University of London on behalf of Commission for Rural Communities (CRC).

The CRC was established as a division of the Countryside Agency in 2005 and then became a non-departmental public body under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (with the Countryside Agency reformed into Natural England and the CRC). In June 2010 it became one of the first public bodies to be abolished by the new coalition government, with its functions being transferred directly into the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Methodology

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Market towns can be defined in a variety of ways. The traditional image is one of a medium to large settlement providing a wide range of services to both its own population and that of a well defined hinterland of smaller rural settlements. While this traditional image remains valid it does not provide a suitable basis on which to base our understanding of population and economic trends.

The *Market towns* update uses a definition of market towns taken from the Urban Hierarchy developed by RERC. Under this categorisation all rural places with between 1,500 and 40,000 residents, free-standing and in open countryside are classed as Small Towns. Using this classification there are over 1,600 such places in all parts of England. The full range of settlement types included in the Urban Hierarchy are:

- Metropolitan (pop >750,000)
- Large Town (<750,000 and >250,000)
- Medium Town (<250,000 and >100,000)
- Other Town (<100,000 and >40,000)
- Small Town (<40,000 and >1,500)
- Small Settlement (<1,500)
- Rural (postcode does not intersect an urban settlement)
- Miscellaneous (settlements of Small Town size listed separately as they are military bases or university campuses)

This definition of a market town broadens the focus from one concerning largely service provision to encompass all issues for which applicable data are available. It therefore includes places with few, if any services but which play other distinctive roles. This allowed RERC to explore the varied nature and broader significance of these towns.

Summary of main findings

- In 2009 the population living in Small Towns was 11.4 million or 22% of the population of England
- Between 2001 and 2009 overall the population growth in Small Towns was 4.3%, compared to 4.7% for England as a whole
- Despite overall population growth (469,000) between 2001 and 2009, this figure disguises declines in the age group of young families (30-44) and a larger growth in retired population. Moreover one in three Small Towns experienced a decrease in population
- Nationally, the majority of Banks and Building Societies, Petrol Stations, Post Offices, Secondary Schools and Supermarkets are located in Small Towns
- Amongst towns of all sizes Small Towns saw the lowest percentage loss (-22.5%) of Post Offices between 2000 and 2010
- Those out of work and seeking help into employment, training or accessing benefit payments in Small Towns and smaller settlements, will have to travel,

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on average, greater than 6km or more to access face to face Job Centre Plus services

- Small Towns have the second highest proportion of national businesses (21%) and employees (17%) after Metropolitan areas (33% and 36%)
- Between 2008 and 2010 Small Towns experienced a 3% decline in the number of businesses compared to a national average decrease of 2.7%
- The London (67%) and North East (72%) regions have the greatest proportions of the most deprived Small Towns whereas the East of England (14%) and the South East (12%) regions have the least

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